

Study on Chinese Folk Customs in Early Twentieth Century from *On a Chinese Screen**

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Abstract—In the 1920s, British writer Maugham created his very representative travelogue to record the traveling along the Yangtze river in China: *On a Chinese Screen*, which describes in detail the various Chinese folk customs in villages and cities from an outsider perspective of modern western civilization. He not only explores a new understanding of the modern Chinese folk culture in time and space, but also puts unique aesthetic feelings on Chinese culture. Therefore his travel notes can be considered as the excellent literary texts reflecting the "internal value" and "external value" of Chinese folk customs.

Keywords—Maugham; *On a Chinese Screen*; Chinese folk customs

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Travel writing has attracted more and more attention from critics, which is of great literary value and has a long history in both China and the west. Being different with a number of western missionaries traveling and then recording what they have seen in China, British writer William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965)'s travelogue *On Chinese screen* is quite unique, which has not only the detailed descriptions of social activities and natural landscapes as well as his traveling experiences but also records many of China's customs with a writer's sensitiveness. The travelogues written by Maugham usually possess the typical exotic style and such writings of Chinese customs can be seen as his own strong subjective projection on oriental mystery.

II. FOLKLORE DESCRIPTIONS IN *ON A CHINESE SCREEN*

From 1919 to 1920, Maugham traveled for half a year down the Yangtze River into China. During this period, Maugham came into contacting with all levels of Chinese society. What valuable lies in that, unlike many colonists at that time, Maugham did not think highly of himself as a person from a developed industrial civilization space; instead,

he pursued his own China's image as an ancient empire with his own understanding of oriental civilization. He laments for the decline of China's mysterious ancient civilization. In general, the following folk customs can be revealed in his travelogue:

A. *Ritual: the Mystery of the East*

Maugham's travel recording placed great emphasis on the rituals seen during his journey. As a state of etiquette in an ancient Oriental country, China has passed down many customs and etiquette since ancient times. Among them, the worship of ancestral gods is a time-honored custom, which stems from the worship of the soul. "Human ancestors used animism to think and treat themselves, and formed the concept of immortality of the soul. [1] According to Chinese and western folklore scholars' studies, worshipers can help themselves to obtain spiritual relief by burning or lamenting some objects which has symbolic meanings and praying with words. Over long time, worshipping has formed some certain behaviors have symbolic significance. In the chapter "A Libation to the Gods," Maugham described in detail the traditional Chinese worshipping procedure that an old woman was lamenting her unknown relatives. Among the descriptions, what impressed by Maugham is not only the unique ritual but also a strange material used in the procedure, that is so-called "Paper shoes". The word "Paper shoes" was given special meaning by the fact that Maugham was not quite sure what these shoe-like objects were, or what their function in the cult were, and it was likely that it was the first time he had seen them. Paper shoes was translated directly into "paper ingot" by Chinese translator Tang Jianqing of Shanghai translation publishing house in the Chinese version, which implied the significant cultural gap between Maugham the author and Tang the translator. As a western author, Maugham use Paper shoes to describe what he observed in a ritual while a Chinese translator Tang instead, know clearly what the paper shoes were. Maugham's gaze at an ordinary Chinese person's sacrificial ritual is full of curiosity. As an exotic wanderer, Maugham cannot speak Chinese, and when he chanced upon the old man worshipping, he could only watch what was happening through his eyes, his gaze, with a sense of western cultural ideology, is a

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conscious observation of the mysterious religious rituals of the east.

In the chapter "Temple of heaven", Maugham described another very grand and solemn ritual, which is for the son of heaven to pray for good weather on the winter solstice. What meaningful lies in the descriptions of these ceremonies, which is not the narration that Maugham saw with his own eyes in China, but the imaginary scene after he saw the temple of heaven and some other solemn buildings in Tiantan. Therefore, the ritual procedures for the worship to heaven are also completely imagined based on the accumulation of his knowledge to Chinese culture. The only reason for it lies in that Maugham himself did not have the opportunity to witness the grand ceremony of heaven worship in reality, therefore, when he got a chance to see the temple of heaven himself, he could not help imagining the grand ceremony of heaven worship just like he was a witness.

B. Country and City: a Pastoral Utopia

Maugham spent a lot of time describing the tranquility and peace of the countryside as well as the noise and bustle of the city, just like a utopia of dreams. The architecture of the countryside, the working farmer, City inn coolies, hotel officials and people from other social classes have been depicted in detail. In the chapter "Dawn", Maugham gave the vivid describing of the morning routine of modern Chinese people like what a Chinese ink painting painted: Chinese people seemed living in the ancient China. Even when he passed by a bamboo forest, Maugham imagined a group of ladies walking on the bamboo path with "a pair of small feet, three inch gold lotus" go to a temple to offer incense, rest after "lotus step light move, sit in a sedan chair, and to start". [2]

Maugham wrote China into a pastoral utopia with the imagination being peculiar to a writer's imagination. Actually the 1920s in China, the order and customs of the feudal society for thousands of years were being severely impacted by the modern western civilization, and foreign colonialists were infiltrating the Chinese mainland in various ways. However, in Maugham's eyes, what he chosen to record are still those ancient glory and those foreign oldest primitive customs: Man and nature live together in harmony. The reason why Maugham has such a perspective lies in that he came from Britain where capitalism is developing and the disadvantages and damage brought out by industrialization of industrial society to old rural civilization are vividly seen, which also urged Maugham to travel around the world, escaping from the circle of previous life, and trying to find the utopia of dreams in the ancient Oriental civilization. Therefore, the drudgery of hard work, the life of rural poverty, and the toil of urban citizens all became beautiful images in Maugham's eyes associated with the glory of ancient civilization, especially the image of emperors and ladies with three-inch-golden -lotus feet.

C. Clothes: the Exotic Style

In his travels, Maugham encountered all nationalities of people from all walks of life in China, and their clothes became a very exotic aspect of his observation. In the

chapter "The Mongol chief", the Mongol chief "wore a black silk jacket, and black silk trousers, the legs of which were tucked into the boots with the top raised high, and a traditional Mongolian mink hat. The way of clothing is an important part of human life and culture, which is a symbol of social status. Since the Shang dynasty in China, only nobles or heads of state could wear clothes of a certain color to distinguish the superior from the inferior. Silk, the symbol of the east, is highlighted by Maugham. The Mongolia chief was dressed in a black silk coat and black silk trousers thrust into his long riding boots with their turned-up toes; and on his head he wore the high sable cap, which all belongs to Mongolian traditional characteristic style.

In another chapter "The Road", there was an old woman in the road, wearing a blue blouse and short blue trousers, and her feet were already wrapped around, with a bamboo stick to support her staggering steps. This should be most life-like clothing style to the lowest working people. The clothes of people in different classes have different characteristics: the lords in small towns dressed in jacquard black robe and small lined jacket, standing on the roadside chatting; In each of their hands a thin stick, on which stood a bird, tied with a thin rope; Chinese officials, on the other hand, wear gold-rimmed glasses, brown satin robes, a black silk jacket and a wide-brimmed low-felt hat.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOLKLORE DESCRIPTION

As a key word for the academic expression in modern time, writing, to some extent, is a way of expression, whether that expression is linguistic, vocal or graphic. In Derrida's writing, "Spacing" is an important concept. The function of spacing is that the space of distance and time is generated, and the meaning is expanded in an original place. Interval is the combination of time and space, which are the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space. [3] Travel provides such a "space" for writing. Maugham travelled going beyond countries and cultures as a freedom-loving "tourist" who wanted to escape the shackles of western society. [4] As a writer, different from other tourists with political purposes, Maugham's gaze on the eastern society always contains his personal experience and memory and pre-text about the east, which happen to be in the "framework" of his own gaze. Maugham's writing of the Chinese social custom in the travel notes means a lot: in the first place, it means he jumped out of the original space and expressed his admiration to ancient Chinese culture in words; in addition, in order to satisfy his China's imagination as the Utopian, he made his own map with the big difference from the perspective of "the other"; meanwhile, writings of the custom in China greatly influence Maugham's inherent ideology to modern China. Therefore, in this way, the new finding and new knowledge about China's society in the 1920s can be renewed.

Maugham's travel writing well explained the "internal value" and "external value" of folk culture. The so-called internal value refers to the role of folk culture in the social and historical space and time in which it exists. External value refers to the ideas and comments attached to these cultures by scholars, social activists and people in the

cultural industry as outsiders. [5] As the insiders, the Chinese people in the 1920s, regarded these customs as part of their lives, which played a significant role in the society and historical space and time at that time and they were living lives. From another perspective, as an outsider, Maugham, especially as an exotic wanderer from the industrial civilization space to the agricultural civilization space, these customs become an important part of his description of exotic customs. As to the contemporary Chinese, the customs described by Maugham also become an important record to gaze at this period of history and understand the life and spiritual outlook of Chinese people. Maugham endowed this period with additional cultural value, which is a unique and charming external value in terms of folklore.

IV. CONCLUSION

The colorful description of customs in the travel notes from different perspectives can be used as a key to understand contemporary Chinese people. By gazing at the local customs, spiritual temperament and cultural aesthetics of modern China can be clearly seen in the literary text; furthermore, literary value can be constructed, which cannot be ignored in literary texts and history. Maugham, as a modern western prestigious writer, toured into the period of collision between China's ancient civilization and modern civilization actually have a conversation on Chinese customs both by writing travelogues, in which the east and the west, the tradition and the modern, the folk and the mainstream are magically blended together in a broader literary and historical context.

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